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## Personal Reflections On Leadership For Change: An Invited Article

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# Personal Reflections On Leadership For Change: An Invited Article

## **Abstract**

Leadership is both an art and a science. It requires one to understand what leadership actually entails before thoughtfully applying the principles that ensure effective positive leadership and creating the conditions that must exist for effective leadership to occur and to be sustained. The leadership dynamics described in Leadership for Change are shaped by a 40-year career in higher education — the last 16 of which have been spent as President of Western Kentucky University.

## **Keywords**

confidence; trust; vision; action; change

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# Personal Reflections On Leadership For Change: An Invited Article\*

**Gary A. Ransdell** *President, Western Kentucky University*

## Abstract

*Leadership is both an art and a science. It requires one to understand what leadership actually entails before thoughtfully applying the principles that ensure effective positive leadership and creating the conditions that must exist for effective leadership to occur and to be sustained. The leadership dynamics described in Leadership for Change are shaped by a 40-year career in higher education — the last 16 of which have been spent as President of Western Kentucky University.*

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## Lessons About Leadership Learned Through 40 Years in Higher Education

Since graduating with an undergraduate degree in 1973, I have spent the last 40 years serving in six administrative roles at three different universities — each with increasing levels of leadership responsibility. For the last 16 years, I have served as President of my Alma Mater, Western Kentucky University. During this most satisfying and enjoyable of careers, I have made a point to observe effective leaders, studied leadership qualities that bring about effective change, and tried to apply those principles that cause people to perform and achieve in ways they might not have otherwise thought possible. This *International Journal of Leadership and Change* is the ideal forum in which to share my observations, in hopes they might influence others who are honing their leadership style and behavior.

Leadership traits can be learned and applied. That learning process starts when individuals are diligent and thoughtful about how they act in the presence of others and embrace those with whom they work — and live. The last two words are important because leadership is not something that can be turned on when one is in the work environment and neglected in social, family, or leisure moments.

What I will attempt to do in the next few paragraphs is to articulate the key variables that frame both the science and the art of leadership; that is, what is documented in long-standing theory and what is intuitive and instinctive.

## Leadership Defined

Leadership is about eight things that must exist in the life of any organization, but especially in the life of a college or university.

- **Vision.** People expect a leader to define what their organization is capable of becoming. There needs to be consensus within the organization for what that vision can and should be, but it is the leader's responsibility to act at all times in ways that bring confidence within the organization that the shared vision can, and will be, achieved. It is the leader's responsibility to make decisions to steer the institution toward the achievement of that vision. The vision should be clear, concise, easily understood, and bold enough to capture the energy and adrenaline of those within the organization and the interest of those who observe the institution. Vision, while a key dynamic in strategic planning, should not be confused with mission or goals. A mission is what an organization exists to do; a goal is what it strives to do; a vision is what it believes it can become. The vision should be bold enough to be the guiding principle in an organization's strategic plan for a sufficient period of time to allow measurable outcomes to be documented — outcomes that can validate the achievement of that vision.

- **Change.** Leadership should bring observable, measurable, and tangible change within an organization.

\* At the request of the Chinese government, this article was translated and delivered in China by Dr. Ransdell.

If leadership is not bringing about positive, identifiable change, then one has to question the degree to which leadership is actually being exercised. People need to see an organization grow, evolve, and change for the better. This, in the final analysis, is the measure of one's leadership abilities. Change requires adaptability. An adaptive leader adjusts to changing demands, anticipates trends, and knows when to leverage opportunities for effective change.

- **Ideas.** Leadership is about ideas — either original or borrowed. Thus, it is important for a leader to be well read and understand what is occurring in other similar organizations at home or abroad. Not every idea is a good idea, and a leader needs to instinctively know when an idea is good or timely; and, more importantly, when it is not. A leader needs to be creative and active in the realm of new dimensions and ideas: ideas that solve problems, keep the organization fresh and evolving in ways that help achieve its vision, and bring energy and new knowledge to the organization.

- **Innovation.** Innovation is brought about through bold new thinking, information, and ideas, which lead to significant change. Leaders innovate in ways that most other people in the organization either cannot, will not, or choose not to recognize or are not in a position to bring innovation and ideas to the organization's marketplace. A leader should not be afraid to introduce new innovations in the life of the organization, just as he or she should be quick to acknowledge when feedback and information suggest that an innovation's time has not come, or it is not good for the organization. The leader, therefore, must possess good instincts, which clearly signal when to pursue or not to pursue an innovative idea, or when to pull the plug on an innovative but ill-timed idea.

- **Risk.** Leaders understand the risk-reward ratio in any given action. It is important for a leader to sense when the victory in a given pursuit is worth the cost and, more importantly, not worth the cost. There are times in the life of any organization when ideas and strategies are in play. It is the leader's responsibility to determine whether or not the energy being spent in pursuit of what may appear to be a good idea is becoming too costly, too disruptive, too controversial, or too consuming. A leader must have enough strength to recognize such risks and call a halt or change the game plan in order to maintain an appropriate esprit de corps and a high level of confidence within the organization. On the other hand, a leader also must visualize the end result and guide the institution toward the achievement of important outcomes. As long

as the outcome is worthy of extended effort, then it is the leader's responsibility to adjust the strategies necessary to achieve that outcome, even perhaps at some cost. Understanding the risk-reward ratio is a critical dynamic in any leadership continuum.

- **Courage.** An effective leader must be confident and act with courage. Leadership is not for the timid or the meek. A leader must understand that there will be those who will question, debate, resist, or fight against ideas, change, or action with which they might not find agreement or philosophical appreciation. It is the leader's responsibility to act in the best interest of the institution, organization, or corporation, as long as he or she truly believes that the enterprise is being well served by any given set of actions — always, however, measuring the dynamics and the risk-reward ratios. It also takes courage always to do what is best for the organization, even when it may not be best for an individual or individuals within the organization.

- **Engagement.** It is critical that leaders understand how important it is to be fully engaged with the people who comprise the organization. It is the people with whom one works who typically come up with ideas, who typically implement strategies, and who always achieve the outcomes. Seldom does the leader actually achieve the goals. It is the leader's job to ensure the organization is sufficiently financed; that the organization exists in a pleasant, safe, wholesome environment; and, that there is confidence within the organization that the vision can be achieved. It is the people with whom the leader surrounds himself or herself who perform and achieve. The leader must communicate well, listen intently at all times, and embrace the ideas of those with whom he or she works. Being fully engaged with all levels of personnel within the organization is essential for effective leadership.

- **Action.** Finally, action must be the defined driver of leadership. Without action, leadership is worthless and is not likely occurring. It is action within the organization that brings about positive change and uses ideas and innovation to achieve a vision without unnecessary risk. Without action, the organization cannot evolve, grow, and prosper. Action-based change requires deeds worth doing. It is also the ability to recognize opportunities and act quickly and decisively, to dismantle a structured or outdated or divisive organizational culture, and to remain confident in a fast-paced environment. It is the leader's responsibility to dream and to act in ways that enable the organization to accomplish dreams worth achieving.

## Effective Leadership

### *Effective Positive Leadership Requires Several Key Human Elements*

• **Values.** Leadership can be effective or ineffective; positive or negative. The effective, positive leader, therefore, brings values to the organization. A leader must stand for things that bring pride and distinction to the organization. Because he or she has a strong sense of personal values — values that are deep-seated, and usually a result of what the leader has learned and observed since early in life — the organization can reflect those values.

• **Integrity.** Integrity is critical for effective leadership. People expect their leader to be honest. A leader must be aware that nearly every action or decision is being closely observed and assessed by those within the organization and often beyond the organization — especially by constituents, customers, and the public. If integrity is lacking, or perceived to be in question, then employees and stakeholders alike will lose confidence in the leader and, ultimately, the organization.

• **Trust.** Individuals within the organization must trust the leader to be honest, truthful, transparent, and always have faith he or she will do the right thing. This does not mean everyone will always agree with the leader's decisions or actions, but they must trust that the leader has personal values and integrity and is doing things to the best of his or her ability, for the right reasons. Those within and beyond the organization must have confidence in and trust the leaders to handle financial, personnel, and strategic matters in a thoughtful and effective manner. Once burnt, twice shy. Trust in a leader will erode if action, or the lack of action, in key situations is deemed to be inappropriate or harmful to the organization or its people.

• **Energy.** A leader must bring great energy to the organization. He or she sets the pace. Most leadership positions do not follow the clock. People know whether the leader's work ethic is strong. They follow the leader in terms of how he or she pours himself or herself into the position and its duties. Therefore, sufficient rest and diet become important if a leader is to sustain a high level of energy.

• **Drive.** A leader must be driven in all aspects of life and work. An effective leader leads by example, works hard and smart, and is omnipresent throughout the organization. Working hard is important, but working smart is more so. An effective leader is just as driven to read, research, learn, and listen if he or she is to attack a given task and persist until goals are achieved and the vision realized.

• **Passion.** A leader also brings great passion to his or her work. A leader is not afraid to express emotions or exhibit great enthusiasm for the organization. This is especially true in an educational setting, where people follow the example of its leader. Educational leaders desire faculty who are passionate about their subjects and students, who are passionate about learning. They also want staff to be passionate about the services they render and alumni to be passionate in their support. Faculty, students, and staff, in turn, want to see great passion in the leader of the institution. Practice passion and find fulfillment not in monetary rewards but in helping dreams come alive!

• **Loyalty.** Loyalty is equally important. Individuals (especially students and alumni) must know that their leader is “all in.” A leader must live and breathe the institution; understand its history, uniqueness, traditions, and values; and exude 100% commitment to the organization at all times. A leader must fight for the organization, defend it, protect it, and serve as its biggest cheerleader. Such enthusiasm and energy, however, must be exhibited in a thoughtful, dignified manner. A leader, above all else, must earn respect through his or her actions.

• **Respect.** If people are to be led, they must respect the individual who leads them. A leader who has not earned respect from those within the organization, as well as those who track the organization, cannot be effective. Respect is earned by sound decision making, clearly defined values, impeccable integrity, honesty, and an appreciation of how one carries and presents himself or herself. Respect also is earned through prudence and dignified behavior. Earning respect and trust, however, never ends. It can erode at any time if actions and appearances do not measure up to expectations of the position held.

• **Prudence.** One must be prudent in decision making. People form opinions and impressions based on sound judgment and character. A leader must always choose his or her battles carefully. Not every battle is worth fighting. Thus, leaders should save the fights for matters that are worth the fight. Equally important, leaders should always trust their instincts. If, for any reason, one thinks that saying or doing something would be less than prudent, then it should not be said or done. For example, a sense of humor can be a valuable asset to a leader, provided the humor is tasteful and not offensive to others. Prudence also includes calmness. An old advertisement said, “Never let them see you sweat.” Staying calm, rational, and objective—even when you are frustrated or angry—is especially important in a crisis. Prudence also means minimal conflict and unnecessary drama. Leaders must be assertive but prudent, thoughtful, and calm when pressing an issue.

• **Balance.** Balance is important in the life of any complex organization and especially important to its leader. A leader needs to have multiple interests. Multiple interests make a leader interesting to others and help define a leader’s personality. A leader also should be well read and well informed on matters that go beyond the organization.

• **Appearance.** Appropriate dress, grooming, and fitness are all important. Individuals like to look up to a leader and be proud of how he or she represents himself or herself within and outside the organization. Leaders, then, should error on the side of overdressing, but also understand there are always times when jeans and a casual shirt might replace a business suit. It is important to know what appearance is best suited to a given event or situation, and always be mindful of one’s position and bring style and dignity to it. Exercise and weight control not only help exude a sense of self-pride, but also bring energy and a positive example of personal priorities. Finally, leaders should smile. People need to see that leaders love what they do.

• **Humility.** Leaders have egos, but must keep the ego in check. Leaders should certainly take pride in themselves, understand the position they hold, and always act in ways that bring dignity and respect to the position. But they should not overdo it. So, for example, they should find balance in whether first names are appropriate or titles are in order. Furthermore, they should not be afraid to poke fun at themselves; they should laugh often, but never at the expense of others;

they should show their personality and have fun in their work. I find that if you embrace people, they likely will embrace you.

• **Listening.** Effective leaders listen. They encourage multiple opinions—and learn from them. They can set aside distractions and focus on advice, which may be contrary to an intended course of action. Leaders seek to understand, not judge. Good leaders are also aware of signals or expressions that inhibit open communication. Be an active listener and mean it!

• **Community.** Community is important in the life of any organization, especially in an educational institution. People within an organization, or those affiliated with an organization, need to have a strong sense of community, teamwork, and of a “one for all and all for one” mentality. Family can be an overused word at times, but it is an important principle within a complex organization. A leader must connect, communicate, and engage everyone within the organization; from the lowest paid to the highest paid; from those who perform important, but routine tasks; to those who perform highly intellectual and complex tasks within the organization. Effective leaders embrace diversity—both cultural and intellectual. Assemble a team of people who think differently and come from different backgrounds and perspectives. Leaders encourage challenges to conventional thought and find common ground. Creating and sustaining a sense of community within the organization is important to ensuring a strong esprit de corps among those who are expected to perform for the organization. A principle worth remembering is that no one works for anyone else in the organization; rather, everyone works with each other and for the organization.

• **Place.** The place itself also is critical. The leader must exhibit, at all times, a great sense of pride in the physical location in which the work of an organization gets done. This is especially true for colleges and universities. The environment in which the work gets done is essential. Buildings must be warm when it is cold outside and cool when it is warm outside. They must be well maintained. The grounds need to be well kept. Trees, lawns, and landscape are important in an organization. People must take pride in the place and value being there. When employees come to work (or when students leave their residence hall), they must love where they are, be inspired by their “home,” and enjoy a special place in which to dream and work. The same principle, in various degrees, exists in any corporate



setting. If the place itself becomes commonplace, tired, and in need of upkeep, then it is a direct reflection of those who lead it. Attention to detail in the workplace, therefore, becomes an important trait of effective leadership.

## Leadership Conditions

Effective leaders cause certain conditions to exist. A sense of **urgency** is important. Effective leaders need to instill within the organization that there is some urgency in the work being performed. Of course, one should save the crisis mode for a real crisis, but one should not allow the organization to become complacent. If it is important, then it also should be urgent. Likewise, leaders should not analyze something to death. When there is sufficient information to act, then do so. A leader must perpetuate a **mission worth achieving**, as well as ensure that the organization's mission is well defined. Those who are pursuing it, and those who might be attracted to it, should be compelled by its importance. Leaders must set **goals** that stir people and stretch their abilities. Modest goals are sometimes necessary, but bold challenges bring out the best in people. Effective leaders also create a **spirit of teamwork** within the organization. Remember, people do not work for people, they work for the organization. They work together to help the organization do amazing things. Good leaders exhibit a sense of **entrepreneurism**. This is where the spirit of ideas, innovations, risk, and reward are all synchronized and exercised by a prudent leader. Finally, the leader must be prudent enough to create a **realistic expectation** that the team can succeed. Visions should be bold, but not so bold that the team becomes disheartened or is overly dubious that the vision is achievable. Leaders need to instill **confidence** that the work is worthwhile, and the work is leading toward the achievement of a shared, important, and fulfilling vision.

## Sustained Leadership

There have been countless studies for generations documenting that leadership can be achieved through coercion or reward. Leaders can use their authority to require or force people to do things, but only for a while. Leaders also can reward individuals to bring about desired results. Neither of these practices

(coercion or reward), however, is likely to result in long-term, sustained performance. The achievement of a bold vision, or change that withstands the test of time, requires some critical leadership dynamics.

Long-term leadership is best achieved through **legitimate authority**, combined with four personal dynamics. First, **charisma** is an important element of leadership. Charisma is a combination of distance and style. Leaders should be well known and recognized across the institution, but there is a limit to which personal relationships should exist among the leader and those he or she is seeking to lead. A little mystery is a good thing, but too much is not! It is okay for people to see some flaws, just not all of them — and not repeatedly. Charisma is often defined by one's style and smile. Effective leaders have a personality. They are likeable. They enjoy their work and those with whom they work. Frowns should be reserved for those times when genuine disappointment needs to be expressed. The rest of the time — keep smiling! Second, leaders have **charm**. When I was hired as President of WKU in 1997, I went to a long-time mentor and asked his advice on what makes a successful president and what will ensure a long, successful tenure. He said three things: Be smart (well read), be prudent (make good decisions), and be charming. Charm is about confidence, comfort, and caring. People must know that the leader cares about them personally, that he or she is interested in what interests them, and that the leader is open and transparent. Third, **human concern** is both important and essential. If leaders want people to care about the organization, then leaders must convey that they care about their people. Individuals will follow if they know that the leader is thoughtful and genuinely interested in their personal well being. One doesn't have to personally know everyone in the organization to make it clear he or she cares about them. Leaders need to be interesting, but it is more important to be interested. Leaders exude decency and civility. Last, such caring must come with **enthusiasm** and **emotion**. Enthusiasm is the adrenaline that drives the organization. It is the positive attitude that must prevail and cannot be exercised without genuine emotion on the part of the leader. Laughter is infectious. Crying is okay, if genuine and rare. There are studies that attest to the importance and power of emotional intelligence. Intellect and emotion are co-sources of life-giving and well-placed emotional energy within the organization.

## Summing it Up

In closing, and more personally, I challenge aspiring and current leaders reading this article to embody several essential leadership qualities: Be **bold**. Be **confident**. Trust your **instincts**. Be **smart**. Be **omnipresent**. Build **consensus**. Focus on **priorities** that bring dramatic change. And, do not forget to have **fun**. There is an Italian word that I like, which offers a fitting conclusion to these random thoughts: Good leaders have **sprezzatura** — the ability to do something difficult with apparent ease. Sprezzatura is an important trait for an effective leader. Here is hoping you have sprezzatura, that you enjoy your work, and that you are leading people to achieve a great vision!